

Belle Isle

Island in the Detroit River a short distance upstream from the center of Detroit.

Local		
State	✓	9/10/79
State Marker	✓	9/11/79
National	✓	2/25/74



Belle Isle Conservatory and Aquarium
Photograph courtesy of
the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office



Historic overview:

Belle Isle is an island park that opened in 1884. The park's structures range from a magnificent glass-domed Horticultural Conservatory complex to simple open rain shelters. The majority of the buildings were constructed between 1890 and 1915, giving the entire park a turn-of-the-century Victorian atmosphere. The real historic value of the park is in its collective entirety. There are a number of inland lakes and lagoons, a canal system, and wooded areas.

Known as Wah-na-be-zee (Swan Island or White Swan) to its original owners, the Chippewa and Ottawa tribes, Belle Isle first interested European settlers when Antoine De la Mothe Cadillac granted the island as commons to the village of Detroit. These first inhabitants used the island for grazing land, principally for hogs. Thus, the island was renamed Ile au Cochons (Hog Island). On July 4, 1845, a party of young picnickers including Isabelle Cass, daughter of Territorial Governor Lewis Cass, decided that Hog Island should have a more attractive name. Belle Isle was chosen in honor of Isabelle Cass.

It passed from public domain into private hands in 1769, but shortly thereafter returned to public land. Around 1817, the public began to return to the island, using it for picnics, duels, and in times of emergency as a quarantine area. The island was sold to the City of Detroit in 1879.

In 1883, Frederick law Olmstead, the most prominent landscape architect and park planner in America, was hired to assist in planning Belle Isle. 1920-1940 marked the Golden Age of Belle Isle as the increase in automobiles arriving made the park more accessible. Today, Belle Isle remains a green oasis near the heart of the city.

